



# Local Distilleries Launch CT Spirits Trail



By **Leeanne Griffin** · Contact Reporter

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**O**bservant shoppers may have noticed more "made in Connecticut" labels in package stores in recent years — vodka from Bloomfield, whiskey from Litchfield, cucumber liqueur from Hartford. A new collaboration between local spirits makers is hoping to boost awareness of locally crafted liquors to another level.

To further bolster the state's growing industry, several craft distilleries and producers have banded together to launch the CT Spirits Trail, a project to encourage visitors to experience Connecticut's local booze at the source. Participating businesses will welcome guests for production tours and tastings, and visitors will mark their stops on "passports," with biannual prize drawings as an incentive to hit every location.

"It's really to shine the light on the amazing products that are being created, with folks that are really passionate about what they're doing," says the trail's president Tom Dubay, CEO of Hartford Flavor Company. Dubay and his wife, Lelaneia, make the Wild Moon line of artisanal botanical liqueurs — in flavors like birch, chai spice, rose and lavender — out of their urban production facility on Hartford's Arbor Street.



The spirits trail is "really to shine the light on the amazing products that are being created, with folks that are really passionate about what they're doing," says the trail's president Tom Dubay, CEO of Hartford Flavor Company. (Suzie Hunter/Hartford Courant)

Last year, as the Dubays were working to introduce Hartford Flavor to the public and constructing a tasting room to welcome visitors, Tom came up with the idea to reach out to the state's other licensed spirits manufacturers, gathering them for a mutual initiative to support and promote Connecticut's promising scene.

"We need something to help all of us kind of supercharge it," he says. "All the boats will rise. The publicity will help us all."

So far, 10 producers have signed on as trail members, including Hartford Flavor Company, Waypoint Spirits in Bloomfield, Onyx Moonshine in East Hartford, Litchfield Distillery in Litchfield, Westford Hill Distillers in Ashford, Hickory Ledges Farm and Distillery in Canton (producers of Full Moonshine) and Connecticut Valley Distillery in Ellington.



The Naughty Boy is a gin-based cocktail made with Wild Moon cucumber liqueur from Hartford Flavor, one of the many stops on the new CT Spirits Trail. (Suzie Hunter / Hartford Courant)

Three other businesses are members of the trail, but are not currently receiving visitors. Mine Hill Distillery in Roxbury is scheduled to open in January, followed by John Fitch Distilling Company in South Windsor, with an opening projected for spring. Maple Lane Spirits of Preston, producers of Foggy Harbor Spirits, does not yet have space to conduct public tastings. Dubai says these three stops would be automatically counted toward the passport stamp totals

until the venues are fully operational.

Visitors who have their passports stamped at all available participating venues will hand them in at the final stop, where they'll be entered in a biannual contest. The grand prize winner will receive a set of all CT Spirits Trail makers' products.

The spirits producers will support the initiative through a shared marketing budget, says Dubai. The Connecticut Office of Tourism does not have plans to contribute funding to the organization at this time, director Randy Fiveash confirmed in an email. But he said it would support and promote the trail through its various marketing channels, including its newsletter, social media, public relations and content on [CTvisit.com](http://CTvisit.com).



A tour at Hartford Flavor Company includes samples of Wild Moon liqueurs and one cocktail featuring their many flavors. (Suzie Hunter / Hartford Courant)

The trail is a "welcome addition" to Connecticut's culinary scene, Fiveash says. "We've seen craft spirits producers pop up all over the state, and think an official trail will only help to promote those small businesses and the industry as a whole."

The spirits trail, and the state's burgeoning spirits industry in general, have been bolstered by relatively recent changes in legislation. Less than five years ago, Connecticut distilleries could not sample liquor, or even sell bottles of their product, on the premises.

That first changed with the passing of 2013's House Bill 6211, which allowed for the offering and tasting of samples of spirits at the places of business where they are produced. Two years later, Senate Bill 386 passed, allowing for manufacturers to sell sealed bottles of their alcoholic liquor on the premises, up to 1.5 liters per consumer.



Every tour at Waypoint Spirits starts with a seasonal cocktail — this one is made with the Hartford distillery's spiced rum and apple cider. (Suzie Hunter/Hartford Courant)

"That was the key changing point for the industry as a whole in Connecticut," says Adam von Gootkin of Onyx Moonshine, who, as president of the Connecticut Small Brand Council, testified in favor of the 2013 bill. The bottle sales law allows for "an important revenue maker for a small business that's just opening," he says. "We're really happy to see that it's spawning this culture that's quickly coming out."

Onyx launched its "speakeasy"-style tasting room in late November 2015, where guests are invited to taste its product line, including the original 80-proof moonshine and its oak barrel-aged "Secret Stash" whiskey. In its first year, the facility has been "wildly successful," von Gootkin says, increasing sales and becoming an effective marketing vehicle for the product. Onyx has also begun to book private events in the space.

Louis Chatey of Westford Hill Distillers, which he co-founded with his wife, Margaret, in 1997, says the trail is "another route to market" for their craft distillery, Connecticut's oldest. Their products, including Rime organic vodka and a line of eaux-de-vie (fruit brandies) in four flavors, have been staples in local package stores for years, but Chatey says he thinks the trail will help to further raise the brand's profile.



Onyx's moonshine and whiskey in their East Hartford speakeasy-style tasting room. (Suzie Hunter / Hartford Courant)

"We have gotten a lot of national press and been on all the local TV stations, yet we'll do tastings [in stores] and people will come up and say, 'I've never heard of you before,'" he says. "We're expecting that the spirits trail will help drive perhaps a new consumer."

Westford Hill is welcoming visitors on an appointment-only basis, but Chatey says the business has broken ground on a new tasting room facility and expects to have that open by spring.

"[Visitors] get to see us as manufacturers," he says. "So it's helpful to put sort of a face, or place, behind these products ... the fact that they can come to a place like Westford Hill or Hartford Flavor and actually see the hands-on process of what goes into crafting these products ... I think gives us another dynamic."

Like Westford Hill, Ellington's Connecticut Valley Distillery, which produces Smuggler's silver and spiced rums, is also welcoming visitors by appointment, says owner Richard Gummo. Connecticut Valley is scouting for potential spaces that would accommodate a tasting room, he says, as the business set up in Ellington before the state's legislation was amended.

"That wasn't in our plan, and we just never saw Connecticut changing their laws," Gummo says. "But we are glad that they are changing. We just have to head in that direction."



Hartford Flavor makes cucumber, rose, lavender, birch and chai spice flavored liqueurs. (Mark Mirko/Courant file photo)

Trail participants located near busy tourist areas, or in the vicinity of one or more Connecticut wineries or breweries, see plenty of potential for cross-traffic. Jack Baker, co-founder of Litchfield Distillery, says visitors en route to one of the area's several farm wineries or a lunch spot will see the building on Route 202 and "make a U-turn," he says, as many are still surprised to see distilleries opening in Connecticut.

Litchfield invites visitors to stop by for free weekend tours and tastings of its bourbon whiskey, gin and vodka. A liquor-tasting option may broaden the appeal of a beverage-focused day trip, Baker says, particularly if someone in a group isn't into wine or beer. "There might be a spirit drinker or two in the crowd, and now there's something for them on the trail."

Waypoint Spirits has been open since the summer of 2015, but people still express surprise when they walk into the Bloomfield tasting room, says co-owner David Rossi. "They'll say, 'I didn't even know there was a distillery in Connecticut.' ... I think people want to buy local, support local, but they don't necessarily know that we all exist."

Waypoint serves samples of its Wintonbury Gin, Labrador Noon vodka, Man Overboard spiced rum and special-batch honey habanero whiskey, either neat or mixed into small tasting cocktails. The distillery became the third local-beverage destination in town, joining Back East and Thomas Hooker Breweries.

"People like to have stuff like this in their backyard," Rossi says. "It makes it kind of fun."

Members of the trail are also part of the CT Spirits Guild, an industry-focused group, that will work within the state's three-tiered system of alcohol distribution to help grow the viability of small craft distillers, Dubai says. A few spirits makers expressed interest in pursuing legislation that would allow them to serve more than the allotted two ounces of product, perhaps in the form of a second mixed drink or cocktail in a tasting room.

"I think it's a pretty good little start," Dubai says of the trail's nascent concept. "I think as the years unfold, we'll probably go to 15 and then 20 [producers] and we'll see how quickly the industry itself blossoms."

Information: [ctspiritstrail.com](http://ctspiritstrail.com).

### **CT Spirits Trail Participants**

**Connecticut Valley Distillery:** 7 Industrial Drive, Ellington. By appointment. Products: Smuggler's Silver and New England-style spiced rums. 860-966-7248, [ctvalleydistillery.com](http://ctvalleydistillery.com).

**Full Moonshine by Hickory Ledges Farm & Distillery:** 183 Bahre Corner Road, Canton. Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. Products: assorted moonshines (Apple Pie, Pete's Maple, cranberry). 860-693-4039, [fullmoonshine.com](http://fullmoonshine.com).

**Hartford Flavor Company:** 30 Arbor St., Hartford. Friday, 4 to 8 p.m.; Saturday 1 to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 2 to 5 p.m. Products: Wild Moon liqueurs (birch, chai spice, cranberry, cucumber, lavender, rose). 860-338-1642, [hartfordflavor.com](http://hartfordflavor.com).

**John Fitch Distilling Company:** 51 Glendale Road, South Windsor. Opening spring 2017. Products: Gin, with plans for aged bourbon and rye whiskeys. 860-514-7733, [johnfitchdistilling.com](http://johnfitchdistilling.com).

**Litchfield Distillery:** 569 Bantam Road, Litchfield. Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.; and by appointment or chance. Products: bourbon whiskey, gin, vodka. 860-361-6503, [litchfielddistillery.tumblr.com](http://litchfielddistillery.tumblr.com).

**Maple Lane Spirits:** 50 NW Corner Road, Preston. Not yet open to public. Products: vodka, gin, cassis liqueur. 860-889-3766, [foggyharbor.com](http://foggyharbor.com).

**Mine Hill Distillery:** Mine Hill Road, Roxbury. Opening January 2017. Planned products: vodka, gin, aged spirits. 917-971-5905, [minehilldistillery.com](http://minehilldistillery.com).

**Onyx Moonshine:** 64 Oakland St., East Hartford. Tastings Friday, 5 to 8 p.m.; Saturday, noon to 6; Sunday, noon to 5. Tours Friday at 6 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. Products: Onyx moonshine, Onyx 111 proof, Onyx Apple Honey and Cranberry infusions, Secret Stash whiskey. 860-550-1939, [onyxmoonshine.com](http://onyxmoonshine.com).

**Waypoint Spirits:** 410 Woodland Ave., Bloomfield. Friday, 4 to 7 p.m.; Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Products: vodka, gin, rum, special-batch whiskey. 860-858-1446, [drinkwaypoint.com](http://drinkwaypoint.com).

**Westford Hill Distillers:** 196 Chatey Road, Ashford. By appointment. Products: Rime organic vodka, eaux-de-vie (framboise, Pear William, fraise, kirsch), Poire Prisonniere, aged apple brandy. 860-429-0464, [westfordhill.com](http://westfordhill.com).